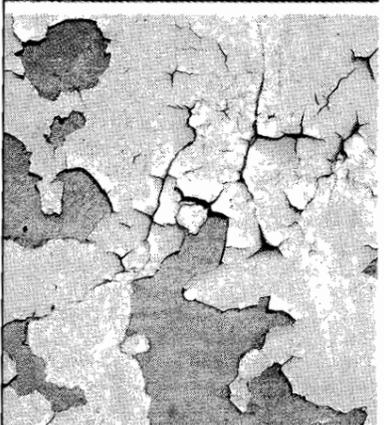
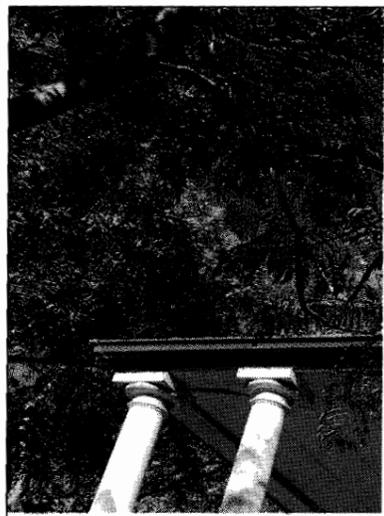


DESIGN



● Architecture

Stumbling blocks

Oldest residential? Oldest in Sydney? Oldest in private hands? Identifying Australia's oldest dwelling isn't as simple as it sounds, writes ELIZABETH FARRELLY.

Decaying grandeur ... (this page) Cleveland House, Surry Hills; (opposite page) historian Sue Rosen at Experiment Farm Cottage, Harris Park. Photos: Tamara Dean, Kate Geraghty

A professor friend used to remark acidly that the disputes in academia are so bitter because the stakes are so low. Much the same might generally be said of Australian heritage. More than that, though, how can there even be disputes? It's not like we're talking prehistory here – mummies, carbon dating, etc. By the time Australia moulded its first brick we were moderns in all but name – already equipped with steam engines, law courts, central heating and false teeth.

Such disputes do, nevertheless,

occur and the latest is the scrap over Australia's oldest house. It's an issue that has smouldered for decades but a new book by historian Sue Rosen has fanned the normally sleepy world of architectural heritage into something almost resembling flames.

The book is *Australia's Oldest House; Surgeon John Harris and Experiment Farm Cottage* (Halstead Press). Sounds innocent but it has been reviled as "handsome but pugnacious", its arguments "dogmatic" yet "inconclusive" and characterised by "snideness" and "shrillness"

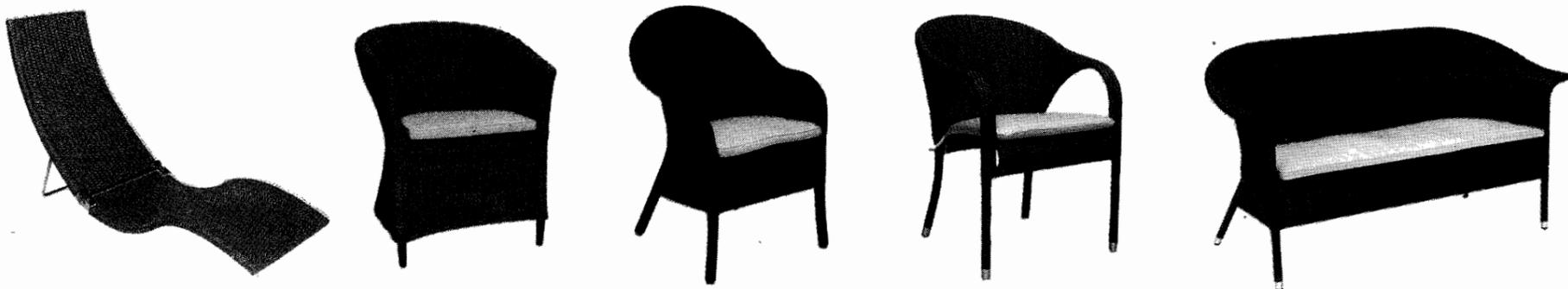
in a recent speech by the usually temperate president of the Royal Australian Historical Society, Professor Ian Jack.

Even if she's wrong, Rosen has upset the apple cart. And there's this: she may not be wrong.

Many people, asked to identify our oldest dwelling, will offer Cadman's Cottage, a two-storey sandstone house in The Rocks, built in 1816 for government coxswains and now in use as – you guessed it – a tourist kiosk.

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treasures, the NSW State Heritage Register, a quite different picture would emerge. The register makes "the oldest surviving residential house in Sydney" one sorely neglected Cleveland House, in Chalmers Street, a short pony ride from Central Station.

A handsome two-storey Georgian number with a low, three-sided verandah and lovely timber columns in the Greek revival style, Cleveland House was built for gentleman emancipist Daniel Cooper in 1823. Once, it addressed itself (and its 4.8-hectare market garden) to Chalmers Street. Now, with its yard filled with Mercs and its lands "Meritonised", the house has a Buckingham Street address, along with missing columns, peeling paint, a rusted roof and grass sprouting like whiskers from its walls.

What, you might ask, is the point of being officially listed as having state heritage significance and, as the register proudly declares, being "protected by the NSW Heritage Act 1977"? Not a lot, perhaps.

It has been reported that the building's owner-occupier, a company named In Vivo Communications, has been issued with an order requiring conservation work on the building by the NSW Department of Planning. But In Vivo insists no such order exists and it is "in very delicate negotiations" with the department on what must be done.

The department says that in March this year it issued a "notice of an intention to serve an order", which required roof repairs to be undertaken and a clear commitment to a maintenance program.

"The heritage branch has been waiting for some time now [and] ... if the report is not received soon, the department will be issuing an order to ensure this important property is properly maintained," a department spokesperson says.

The owners say, rather grumpily, that they will conserve the building but as to when, well, "it could be next week, could be next month, could be before Christmas. Who knows?"

Cleveland House is attributed - in a question-marked sort of way - to Francis Greenway, if you believe the State Heritage Register. But can you? Not only does this official document clearly wrongly list this house as the oldest, it also quotes and appears to rely upon a short piece from the inner-city freebie, *The Sydney Central*, from March this year, which in turn states that the house "built 1823-24 is the oldest surviving home in Australia, pre-dating Cadman's Cottage in The Rocks, previously thought to be the oldest ...".

Reading this, you start to glimpse a conclusion - not as to which is the oldest house; that becomes only more obscure as you realise that



Style arguments, say the historians, are inherently inconclusive, since any individual building can be either old-fashioned or ahead of its time.

people who pass for historians in this town figure that 1823 came before 1816. No, the conclusion you glimpse is how we can have these disputes, since it's not just this house that's falling apart. Even the State Heritage Register itself is, it seems, succumbing to demolition by neglect.

Another house, usually known just as The Cottage at Mulgoa, south of Penrith, claims the title of "Australia's oldest house in private occupation". The Cottage, built in 1810 or 1811, is at least safe and looked after, owned and inhabited by historian James Broadbent, who wrote the definitive 1997 tome, *The Australian Colonial House*.

So the question is, does anything remain of houses built before the 19th century? And the answer is yes.

One thing about which there is no dispute is that the core of Elizabeth Farm, John and Elizabeth Macarthur's house in Parramatta, was built between 1793 and 1794. The core is three small rooms at the front and centre of the house, which has been successfully and significantly added to over the years.

But this brings us to the heart of Rosen's thesis.

Experiment Farm Cottage was bought in 1961 by the then newly formed National Trust, which then believed it to date from the 1790s. Then, in the mid-1970s, National Trust member and art historian Rachel Roxburgh, who had instigated the initial purchase, found an 1839 letter by Elizabeth Macarthur that seemed to suggest a "new cottage" on the neighbouring Parramatta estate of surgeon John Harris, namely, Experiment Farm.

When other documents seemed to corroborate the building of this new cottage around that time, Experiment Farm Cottage was re-dated to 1834-35.

Rosen, however, has undertaken exhaustive analysis that seems generally to point back to the 1790s construction date.

In her campaign to have the evidence acknowledged and answered, she wrote a book.

In many ways, the contretemps reads like an epic battle between the historians and the architects. Generally, without definitive proof either way, the historians adduce

literary and speculative arguments in favour of a 1790s construction, while the architects support a mid-1830s construction date with evidence that is largely stylistic.

"Everything about the house's style," says architect Clive Lucas, who restored Experiment Farm Cottage for the National Trust in the 1990s, "suggests about 1825 - certainly it couldn't be much earlier."

By "everything", the 1830s supporters generally mean: the three-sided verandah, the french doors all round, the elliptical front-door arch and the alignment of the verandah with the main roof.

Rosen, on the other hand, scrutinises Harris's biography - his arrival in the colony, his reasons for building, his purchase of the grant from James Ruse in 1793, his order of materials and the frequency of his attendance at Parramatta.

There is also a map from 1804 showing a substantial building on Experiment Farm, published references from 1821 to "a small cottage at Parramatta belonging to John Harris Esq" and mortar-and-brick analysis indicating pre-1800s materials and techniques, as outlined in a report made by architect to the National Trust, David Sheedy, in 1985.

Style arguments, say the historians, are inherently inconclusive, since any individual building can be either old-fashioned or ahead of its time, bringing influences from elsewhere. Harris had spent 10 years in India, where three-sided verandahs and french doors were common; could he not have manifested his love of such features here in Sydney?

The late architect Neville Gruzman, who was never afraid of contradicting his colleagues, took this view; he argued in 1993 that "John Harris was a very extraordinary man and a great builder".

From here on, the arguments descend rapidly into a morass of minute technicality and inexplicable emotion - a bad sign for anyone expecting clear resolution.

What becomes blindingly clear is that, far from downgrading and demolishing our heritage system at every turn, as the present state government seems hell-bent on doing with its constant legislative depredations, we should be resourcing its organisations, invigorating its scholarship and strengthening its hard-won statutes.

Only with a vastly more rigorous and reliable net can we hope to rescue even our tiny bundle of heritage - the more precious for being so small - from the bog.

●● Objectivity

ADIDAS PREDATOR BOOTS, 1994

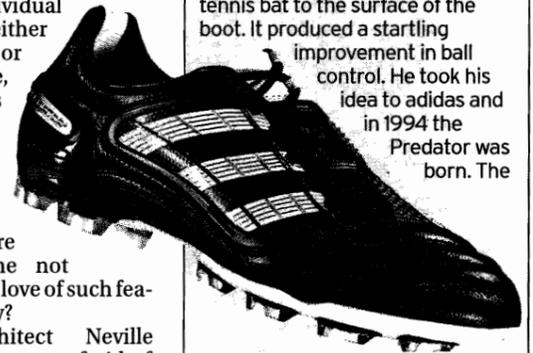
Back in the mid-1970s, when former England and Liverpool soccer star Craig Johnston was just another junior player with a bubble perm and dreams of stardom, he spent many an afternoon cleaning senior players' boots at Middlesbrough Football Club.

It was the soccer equivalent of army cadets being forced to peel spuds but the youngster used the time to ponder how the humble footy boot could be improved.

Following a stellar career for Middlesbrough, Liverpool and England in the 1980s (during which his own boots were presumably cleaned by the next generation of little oiks), Johnston turned to boot design.

Being able to control the ball as closely as possible is obviously vital for any player. Less obvious is the ability to make the ball swerve in the air.

Johnston realised the heavy leather boots of the era didn't grip the ball well. His first experiment to make a "grippy" boot involved gluing the cover from a table tennis bat to the surface of the boot. It produced a startling improvement in ball control. He took his idea to adidas and in 1994 the Predator was born. The



boot has since been updated 10 times, gracing the feet of, among others, David Beckham and Zinedine Zidane.

The latest, the Predator X (pictured, available from the adidas Performance Store at 189 Pitt Street for \$300), has an upper made from "Taurus", a calf-skin leather that adidas claims combines softness with durability. The ball-striking area, which is maximised by removing the tongue, is covered in a silicon-rubber compound.

England's Steven Gerrard and Italy's Daniele De Rossi wore Predators in the World Cup before both their countries stumbled out in the early rounds, neatly demonstrating that a pair of fancy boots does not guarantee success.

Nick Galvin

●● How old is old?

- Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta, 1793-4
- Experiment Farm Cottage, Harris Park, 1834-35 or 1790s
- The Cottage at Mulgoa, 1810/1811
- Cadman's Cottage, The Rocks, 1816
- Cleveland House, Surry Hills, 1823

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